

# Closing the Gap between High School Writing Instruction and College Writing Expectations

*The authors interview high school and middle school writing teachers and find that teaching to the test and the dominance of the five-paragraph essay are systemic problems in writing instruction.*

**A**s standardized testing tightens its grip on the ways in which we understand and assess the quality of education in the United States, that education is being shaped and molded by the pressure of the testing itself. We are, in the profession and in the culture at large, coming to accept quality public education as something that is objective and quantifiable, something we can chart in an Excel file. However, this way of thinking about education at the primary and secondary levels directly contradicts the mission of higher education. Here in the dawning years of the 21st century, ever-increasing numbers of high school graduates are attending college—indeed, a college education is a requirement for most career-oriented jobs. Even those employers whose requirements for entry-level positions as recently as ten years ago did not include a college degree now list one in their minimum qualifications. Even if we think of education in terms of its “real world” applications, then, higher education is crucial.

As this public/corporate expectation for higher education grows, the idea that a high school education is an end in itself becomes old-fashioned, quaint. Despite the tracking model still deeply entrenched in public secondary education, with students labeled “college bound” or “vocational,” or variations on that theme, most students are, in fact, college bound. Whether they attend a local community college or a prestigious research university, most students will pursue postsecondary education.

It is often argued that community colleges mediate the secondary tracking system by provid-

ing an intermediate step between high school and university for the not-obviously-college-bound student. As it applies to the content and work of offered courses, this perception is both naive and condescending. Most community colleges have articulation agreements with universities in the surrounding region; courses taken at community colleges are assumed to be equivalent to similar courses taken at the universities with which they are aligned. English 101 at a community college is institutionally assumed to be equivalent to English 101 at the research university a few miles up the highway, and all students should be assumed to be learning similar content and developing similar skills.

If we think of *all* students as college bound, then we can think about high school education *generally* as college preparatory, spreading that concept over a wider and more level field. From that stance, we must reformulate our conception and creation of secondary education as a middle point rather than the end point of the learning curve. As we think of elementary, middle, and secondary education as occurring on a continuum, with one grade preparing students for the next, we must begin to think of postsecondary education occurring on the same continuum, with high school learning intended specifically to prepare students for the next level of study.

But isn't high school learning *already* a leading step into college? Isn't college content *already* designed to build on what students have previously learned? Well, sure, to a degree—and with a critical difference. High school education is designed to

be standardized and quantifiable. College education is designed to be theoretical.

We think of successful high schools in terms of statistics: comparatively high average test scores, consistent adequate yearly progress percentages, etc. Because success is measured against standards set locally and nationally and based on anonymous student averages, high school instruction is designed, first, to optimize performance on the assessments that provide the statistics. Less quantifiable aspects of the learning experience are subordinated.

Conversely, we think of college as the place where students develop “their own voices,” where they find the confidence to “think for themselves” and “outside the box.” Students are confronted with alien ideas and challenged to articulate and advocate for their own.

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Whether one thinks of the academy as a bastion of open-mindedness and free thinking or as a hotbed of liberal brainwashing, it is virtually universally understood to be a site for abstract analysis and critical thinking—skills resistant to large-scale, objective standardization. Instead of the rigid rules of test preparation high school students learn, college students learn that

with each course and instructor come entirely new expectations, expectations that often contradict those of previous instructors. High school students learn to follow a specific set of rules; college students learn that there are no rules—or, better, that the rules change daily. Instead of the detailed rubrics, repeated drilling, and objective testing they knew in high school, college students find themselves largely autonomous and left to figure out what’s expected of them on their own.

The result is that students leave high school decidedly unprepared for college. Although this is true generally, perhaps it is nowhere as specifically true as in writing instruction. As *No Child Left Behind* has pressed against the high school curriculum and forced a greater emphasis on reading and writing “skill,” it has simultaneously deflected the movement for authentic assessment in writing instruction. The burgeoning focus on process writing

and portfolio assessment—on student-centered and student-driven writing acts and assessments—that had gained footing a decade ago (Goldburg, Roswell, and Michaels; Hansen) has shifted to a focus on “power” and modal writing, the kind of writing that shows well on the essay portions of standardized tests.

Standardized testing, then, has “caused” more writing in high school, but at the expense of actual writing instruction and experience (Fisher and Frey). Students are learning longhand test-taking, not real writing. Bronwyn T. Williams explains the most crucial obstacle between test writing and learning: “Standardized testing, to be standardized, must create questions and answers that leave no room for interpretation. Such rigid questions and answers remove the importance of context from literacy practices and allow for no independent meaning making from students. Yet it is in that moment when an individual makes meaning in writing and reading in a specific cultural context that identity and literacy come together” (154). When students learn test writing well, their high schools show it in statistics, but the students come to college and have to unlearn before they can learn. And teachers on both sides of the gap protest.

This article focuses on writing instruction and seeks to define the expectations of first-year composition (FYC) programs, considers the factors shaping high school writing instruction, and explores the gap between the goals of each. We have interviewed secondary writing teachers and college first-year composition instructors to ascertain the degree to which each feels the pressures of standardized assessment on their instruction and on student development.

## How We Gathered Our Information

We interviewed writing instructors at a large metropolitan university that serves a mainly regional, but increasingly national and global, student population. The regional student population is drawn from urban, suburban, and rural communities within 100 miles of the campus, and an increase in housing has attracted many students from the state and beyond.

Although the university was originally conceived as a regional institution that would serve the

communities surrounding it, the shift to a residential campus is part of an ongoing push for wider appeal. As dormitories go up, so do admissions requirements. Ostensibly, the higher standardized admissions requirements should lead to better preparation for college (“college bound” vs. “vocational”). Yet, writing instructors who have taught at the university before and since the shift in mission report no marked improvement in student writing.

The instructors interviewed represent the full range of the teaching hierarchy (teaching assistant, lecturer, instructor, professor) and a wide range of teaching styles and philosophies. Some have been teaching for decades; others were interviewed during their first year. Some subjects are rhetoric and composition specialists; others are generalists or have other primary specializations.

We also interviewed middle school and high school teachers from surrounding communities, selecting a middle school and high school to represent each demographic area from which the university’s student population is primarily drawn: a large urban district, with an ethnically diverse student population; a slightly smaller suburban district, with a majority white student population but a growing number of African American and Latino/Latina students; and a small rural district, with a limited number of students from ethnic minority groups. The schools are similarly diverse in socioeconomic terms—primarily lower- to middle-level incomes. The faculty population across the board is basically homogeneous—a strong white majority and a strong female majority, especially in English.

We asked all those we interviewed the same series of questions, modified for each education level (middle, high, college), with additional, individualized questions arising organically in each interview. The formalized questions for secondary teachers focused on what they teach and why, their intended learning outcomes, and the effects of standardized testing on their curricula and pedagogy. The questions for college instructors focused on the expectations they have for their students at the beginning of the course and the overall degree to which students meet those expectations, the content and each instructor’s approach to teaching it during the course, common obstacles experienced by the students and/or instructors, and the expectations instructors have for their students at the end

of the course and the overall degree to which those expectations are met.

## Our Findings: Problems in the Teaching of Writing

Although the range of teaching styles at every level was wide and varied, two comments echoed throughout the interviews: secondary teachers feel compelled to teach to the test, and college instructors wish students hadn’t learned so well in high school that an essay is five paragraphs and a thesis statement can appear only as the first or last sentence in the first of those five paragraphs.

Cynthia E. Coburn has challenged the notion of decoupling (the idea that teachers disengage their classroom practice from institutional pressures and priorities), asserting instead that teachers shape their practice to those priorities, and the secondary teachers with whom we spoke instantiate Coburn’s assertion. Several secondary teachers indicated that they administer ACT diagnostics to shape grammar instruction, and virtually every teacher reported a particular, if not exclusive, focus on modal writing instruction. They spoke of process writing in terms of how they addressed each of the common modes, sorted into a continuum:

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personal narrative, exposition, and persuasion, each considered a discrete entity from the others. Teachers who make an effort to teach process writing are constrained beyond efficacy by the boundaries of testing. Their efforts become corrective rather than instructive. One teacher, who valiantly tried to incorporate drafting, workshoping, and conferencing into his writing classes, explains: “I deal with the individual students and talk with them about their papers: what they’ve done wrong, what they should do better, ways to possibly correct that and then I give it back to them and they have the opportunity to revise.” Although his attempt is laudable, his approach undermines the essence of the writing process because

he focused not on helping the writer develop but instead on correcting and directing the writer toward a predetermined goal. G. Genevieve Patthey-Chavez, Lindsay Claire Matsumura, and Rosa Valdés limn the limits of process writing instruction and assert that the primary limiter is the teacher's insufficient knowledge of the process and its intent. When the idea of writing as a process is tamped down into the standardized writing requirements, Patthey-Chavez, Matsumura, and Valdés's point is manifest. In fact, simply calling it "process writing" instead of "the writing process" minimizes the concept from an approach to developing an ability to a category determining an outcome, and squeezes it onto the assembly line.

When even teachers who identify themselves as writers (Wood and Lieberman) and as eager writing instructors are forced into tightly prescribed expectations to teach successful test writing, it seems that the result of their valiant efforts is a frail hybrid—the idea that writing is important for reasons beyond testing, and the impetus to teach writing as a powerful form of communication and expression is there, but the curricular constraints require those ideals to be uncomfortably married to practices that deflate their significance. Of all the interviewees teaching at the secondary level, only one teacher described a real, unadulterated commitment to the writing process, and he described himself as a "rebel" and something of a curricular loner.

Frank W. Serafini invokes education protocols of the early 20th century and interrogates the "School as Factory" as a phenomenon continuing today:

This "scientific" movement was predicated on three main concepts; (1) The School as Factory, (2) The Child as Product, and (3) Standardized Testing as Quality Control. The child was thought of as a piece of raw material to be shaped by the educational "factory" into a quality "product." Teaching became viewed as a form of training, and schools were expected to operate more like assembly lines, working on children as they passed through various stages of the curriculum. Once these factories were "up and running" and the standards for the "child as product" were determined, standardized testing became the means for measuring the quality of this product. (68)

Although there had been movement away from this crusty model as recently as the 1990s, the dramati-

cally increased emphasis on standardized testing, and the drastically heightened stakes of the results of that testing characterized by NCLB, have reverted public education to the factory model. Again, students are products, mass-produced and measured everywhere by the same instrument. We are turning out Big Macs instead of the "lifelong learners" for which every school's mission statement seems to indicate a desire.

And it seems that college writing instruction is allergic to red meat. Virtually all of the first-year composition instructors interviewed—most of whom teach writing as a process, as it is part of the program model at this university—took issue, to one degree or another, with the systematic understanding of writing with which students enter English 101. One instructor's comment succinctly represents them all: "Process is not draft, revise, revise, revise. That is not the writing process. It is not pre-writing or revise." Think about the high school process writing model, with its "brainstorming, prewriting, rough draft, revision, revision final draft" sequence, with its note cards, outlines, semantic webs. There is a fundamental division between that sequential, categorical concept of writing—one that produces students who write mechanically and uniformly, even when they otherwise write well—and the model of writing as a process described by the college teachers we interviewed, which offers few prescribed parameters and broadly conceived expectations.

When asked what they expect from students entering first-year composition courses, college instructors generally noted that their expectations have dropped over the years, as they realized that their first order of business is to help their students unlearn rules and skills that might have served them well in high school. Instructors spoke of being challenged to prove that many of the rules students learned in high school are truly unimportant in college; they spoke of students feeling like they were being "tricked" by the instructor who suddenly tells them they can write in first person and start sentences with conjunctions. One instructor, a professor, explains: "I end up feeling like I am arguing with the students in some way for the first part of the semester and [have to] make them feel that I am not trying to pull one over on them by saying that this is not how we do things here."

Other instructors, when asked about their expectations for incoming students, approached their answer from a different angle than the one presupposed by the question, focusing on not only what they expect students to be able to do but also on their expectations of student attitudes:

I expect them to write a five paragraph essay because that seems to be emphasized so much in high school teaching. I expect them to know that from their perspective writing is entirely formulaic and there's nothing magic about it at all, there's nothing deviating from some kind of standardized essay format, that the thesis has to be at the bottom of the first paragraph and that there are at least three body paragraphs, and there's a conclusion that restates the thesis.

Every instructor we interviewed has similar expectations for the attitudes of their incoming students. Although the expectations for student abilities and preparation varied somewhat (some expected students to be adept writers of the five-paragraph theme, others were prepared to begin instruction at the most basic levels of composition), all assumed—all knew—that most of their students would enter English 101 with a clear and fixed understanding of writing as a defined and particular skill intended to produce a defined and particular product.

The final question posed to the college instructors was a difficult one: “What do you wish students were—or weren’t—learning in high school to prepare them for first-year composition?” While none of the subjects was entirely comfortable with this question, as all were sensitive to the prospect of critiquing secondary teachers themselves, each eventual answer was similar. Some examples:

“I wish that maybe things weren’t so goal orientated and rigid.”

“I would like to see more emphasis on writing and getting students feedback about their writing rather than just having them write a paper, turn it in and get a grade on it.”

“It’s like a double edged sword: the more that you write in certain conditions it can be very problematic for students, because it’s just one more way for you to tell me that I don’t know what I’m doing or it’s just one more hoop that I have to get through.”

“Many students get the impression that writing is something foreign to them or something which occurs only at ‘school.’ As a result, the first half of the semester requires me to get the student involved in his writing toward ownership.”

These comments all intersect in the center of the gap between high school and college writing instruction. One instructor characterized high school writing instruction as students “getting the writer sucked out of them,” and the vacuum seems centered on the black hole of standardized testing, with its consuming focus on what’s quantifiable and uniform.

### Where the Fault Lies

There’s a good reason college instructors were so hesitant to go anywhere near a critique of high school teachers, and it’s important that we make it plain: The blame here is not for the high school teachers, who are doing valiant work with limited resources and unreasonable constraints. Neither do we intend to participate in the specious argument that college instruction is “out of touch” with “real life.” All of the educators with whom we spoke, and the great bulk of the related literature, assess the blame where it belongs: in the fundamental incompatibility between the product model of standardized testing as quality control and the process model of student-centered learning. In short, standardized testing is antithetical to real learning, lifelong or otherwise.

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That’s hardly a novel idea; educators have been making this argument since long before NCLB deified large-scale standardized assessment. We have already cited several recent critics of standardized assessment, and the list goes on well beyond that. Patricia Velde Pederson also points out the ways that standardized assessment affects non-assessed subjects—as it brings pressure to bear on certain subjects, others are abandoned entirely. Some educators, such as Diane Kern et al., have tried to bridge the gap by suggesting more effective ways of teaching to the test without losing essential elements of authentic instruction. Even that



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approach, though, is structured into five “principles” that can become a static rubric.

Our research offers real, human evidence of the failure of standardized assessment and of the high school model aligned with it. This “factory model” that privileges product over process and standards over students impedes students from success in college. Kirk S. Kidwell asserts that “the purgatory of the first year results from the challenge posed by adopting new styles of learning that are less a matter of skills and more a matter of the student’s relation with him- or herself as a learner, with instructors serving not so much as authorities but rather as facilitators, colearners with the students. And, in this, the high-school experience seems to be more a part of the problem than the solution” (254). Instructors routinely describe having to spend the first half of their semester unteaching the skills and traits students acquired during high school, encouraging initiative, autonomy, and invention, and convincing students that it is OK to


stray from the pack—and that they’re not just saying that so they can trip students up later. This mistrust for teachers and skepticism that teachers could be interested in their students’ success is perhaps the most troubling aspect of test-based instruction. When there is always a “wrong” answer, the risks are much greater in the attempt to formulate a “right” answer, and the idea that there might be more than one right answer simply doesn’t compute. It’s A, B, C, *or* D, right? If the thesis isn’t the first sentence, that’s points off, right? So what are you trying to pull by telling me otherwise?

College instruction is generally conceived in more holistic terms. First-year writing courses are designed to encourage students to, in the words of one instructor, “just know that there are different ways to solve different writing situations. They need to know that there is a range of options and they need to know what those options are. *They need to make some sort of attempt to do something different*” (italics added). Colleges are moving in increasing

numbers to Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) and overarching writing program models (Moghtader, Cotch, and Hague; Parks and Goldblatt), and this disparity will widen as the focus on college writing becomes ever more unquantifiable. Portfolio assessment, for example, can be normed, perhaps, but it cannot be standardized.

## Redefining High School

We suggest that the gap we've fathomed here can be narrowed or even closed by rethinking the purpose of high school entirely. It is no longer the end point of a student's formal education; even students who might not attend four-year institutions are increasingly likely to continue their education at community colleges. And in a real-world context, even entry-level positions are requiring degrees, a trend that continues upward. No longer can we think of high school as its own end. We must begin to think about it as preparation for the next educational step—college—and we must calibrate our instruction, and our assessment, with that in mind. If we are going to prepare students to learn and think in college, then we must prepare them to resist categorization. If we prepare them to resist categorization, then we can no longer assess them according to categories.

It's important to know whether students and their schools are succeeding, and we must come to a consensus about what success is. But can't we agree that calling an anonymous, decontextualized number on a Scantron sheet is hardly a valid marker of success? Students and their teachers are individuals, and until we can assess them according to their individual strengths and struggles, then we will never have successful assessment, no matter how neat and tidy an Excel spreadsheet looks. 

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